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ABSTRACT

Part of the series on parenting education for American Indians, this booklet discusses some of the common communication problems parents face with their children as the children grow older. There are various ways of communicating, such as by sounds, by words, by sentences, by touch, by holding and showing affection, by body language, and by using our eyes and facial expressions. Rules for establishing good communication between parent and child include: no subject is taboo, honesty is required, condemnation is not allowed, understanding as a goal, and mutual respect must be shown. The importance of letting children know that they can discuss anything with their parents is stressed in the concluding chapter. (ERB)

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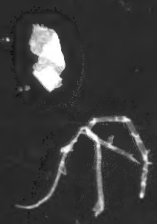

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Parent-Child Communication

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Introduction

Too often, parents don't realize there is a communication problem with their children until its too late. All of a sudden we see an adolescent or teenager in our home that we hardly recognize. There are sudden behavior changes that puzzle us, and we have trouble "handling" them.

Sometimes our children have grown so fast that we don't realize they are almost adults until they start doing things that adults do. Maybe our 12-year-old is sneaking cigarettes, or our 13-year-old is becoming sexually active. It may be a very traumatic situation that confronts us unexpectedly, such as an arrest of our child for junvenile delinquency. Suddenly we realize that they are no longer children, and feel like we have lost control.

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It is painful and difficult when such things happen, but it is not impossible. Problems can still be faced squarely and honestly, and a good parent-child relationship can be re-established. It may take someone else's help though. We must not be afraid to go for help when it is neded. Anything we can do now, before our children become legal adults, is bound to help. We may be tempted to throw the towel in the ring and just give up. But if we love our children, we must never give up on them.

This booklet will talk about some of the common communication problems parents face with their children as the children grow older and older. But in order to discuss these problems, it is important to start back earlier. Communication is something that must begin early, and be maintained all the way. When there are communication breaks, we begin to feel frustrated and helpless. But if we set a good example early, it is easier to re-establish communication during crises.

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Parents can also communicate to their infant. There are lots of ways of communicating. We will list some of the most important:

—We communicate by sounds, by words, by sentences

—We communicate by touch, by holding and showing affection

—We communicate by other movements, sometimes called body language

—We communicate by using our eyes and facial expressions

A smile communicates joy. A frown communicates sadness. Soft sounds communicate soft feelings. Hard sounds communicate hard feelings. Happiness, comfort and pleasure show on our faces, in our eyes, by the way we move and interact. So does anger, displeasure, or anxiety. Infants pick up all these feelings very quickly. They are closely attuned to their parents' moods, and parents are closely attuned to their children's moods.

Sometimes we tune these things out. This may be caused by our own fears and feelings of inadequacy. We should be aware of how much and how often we try to "tune out" our children, and try to balance it with lots of "tuning in."

If we give our children a lot of attention, we are communicating to them that they are important and deserve our attention. If we neglect them or their needs, we are communicating to them that they are not important to us, and it makes them feel bad. If we show our children respect, they will learn to respect themselves and others. But if we show disrespect, it will be hard for them to respect themselves or others.

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The ways we communicate with our children when they are very young will affect the ways we communicate with them when they grow older. If we are not able to communicate with them as infants or toddlers, we will not be able to communicate with them as adolescents or teenagers. Communication is something that must begin early and keep happening all along. It can never stop.

As our children grow older, we are able to communicate with them more openly and honestly. We must not be afraid to share our feelings and ideas with them. If we want them to share their feelings and ideas with us, we must do the same with them. Communication means an openness to each other. It means a willingness to speak, and it means a willingness to listen. It also means a willingness to let our children express their anger at us. If we do not allow them to do this verbally, they may bind other ways that are dangerous.

Here are some rules for establishing good communication:

1. No subject is taboo.
2. Honesty is required.
3. Condemnation is not allowed.
4. Understanding is the goal.
5. Mutual respect must be shown.

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No Subject is Taboo

It is important that we let our children know that they can discuss *anything* with us. If we are unwilling to discuss something, they may go to someone else to discuss it. This means that (1) they may lose respect for us and not come to us with other matters, and (2) someone else becomes their main teacher and model. We may feel that we don't know much about the subject, but we can help our children know where to go for the answers they need.

For example: teenagers may have questions about sex. Or, as parents, we may be overcome with worry that they are becoming sexually active. It is important for us, as parents, to first be concerned for *their* safety and well-being. As difficult a subject as it may be, they need to be aware of the consequences of pre-marital sex. If we do not feel comfortable with discussing it, we should call upon tribal social services, or Planned Parenthood groups, who can assist with teaching teenagers about sex.

Another example: our son wants to talk to us about dying. We may feel he's too young to worry about this, and brush him off. This makes him feel we don't care about him, and makes him worry even more. Lines of communications are then broken.

Honesty is Required

If we want our children to be truthful, we must be truthful with them. We need to let our children know when they are very young that lying and deception is much worse than almost anything else between parents and children. If we practice honesty ourselves, our children will learn to be honest with us too. For as parents, it is *our* responsibility to set a good example, which hopefully, our children will follow.

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